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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1250619>

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# **Women's perspectives on the value of a father's initiative in shifting gendered practices within families.**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the qualitative perspectives of women about a community embedded fathers initiative in Northern England. Projects to improve the wellbeing of men and their children are less common within the landscape of parent and child support, with mothers more often being the target recipients. Asking women about their perceptions of an initiative for fathers then offers original insights from women who are positioned as 'related outsiders', in that they were 'outside' the project but 'inside' the family and community. Findings suggest that women are able to see the positive impact of such a project, identifying that it offers a shared space for men and children, time for mothers without their children and can help with shifting roles and attitudes around child care and emotional labour in the home. The initiative was also seen by the women as offering men more healthy means of coping, including men moving away from traditional hegemonic practices, which in turn shifted some women's long held gendered beliefs about men as fathers. This research then offers a relational gendered backstory to a father's initiative, demonstrating how such initiatives can potentially 'undo' gender and the positive implications this could have for families.

**Keywords:** Fathers, Families, Mothers, Gendered Roles, Qualitative Research

## **Introduction**

Active involvement of fathers is recognised as an important means for improving the health and wellbeing of children, however many fathers still express feeling unsupported in their parenting endeavours (Davies, 2015). Research suggests that men would like more father-child

focused activities (Buckelew et al., 2006) and specifically group based peer support with other fathers (Carlson et al., 2014). As parent and child support is often mother and child focused (Buckelew et al., 2006; van Praagh, 2015; Lloyd et al., 2003; Tunstill et al., 2005), group based projects for men as fathers can then fill a gap in support for men as fathers. Existing parenting support or group provision thus often acts to reinforce gender norms about parenting being about the maternal (i.e. mothering rather than fathering), with domesticity and the home continuing to be conflated as a site of women's labour (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Mallett, 2004). The relationship between women and initiatives for fathers (such as the one discussed here) thus remains an important area of investigation, particularly in relation to gendered aspects of family life and how women perceive any reordering or shifting of gendered practices as a result of such initiatives.

Whilst evidence does exist around programs or initiatives for fathers, such interventions are noted to take diverse forms (Bronte-Tinkew, Burkhauser and Metz, 2012), and often focus on father-child engagement (c.f. Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett and Wong, 2009). There is still limited research evidence about the value of community fatherhood groups. We perhaps therefore know less about how beneficial community group interventions are for improving wellbeing, self-esteem, or for aspiration raising of men and their children, and we know even less about the impact of such groups on women. The success of group approaches are often noted as promising practice within the landscape of understanding fatherhood (Hansom and Young, 2010; Bronte-Tinkew, Burkhauser and Metz, 2012). Men have reported that participating in groups with peers can help alleviate the isolation they may feel in parenting and provide a sense of belonging (Carlson et al., 2014). Whilst some knowledge does exist about how best to work with fathers (Lloyd, 2001; Burgess, 2009; Vann, 2007), evidence about how initiatives for men are experienced by heterosexual women as mothers or community members is lacking from the wider corpus of literature. Earlier research has suggested that

projects for fathers can help increase paternal support and help improve couple relationships (Burgess, 2009), which hints at the ability of such interventions to rebalance roles and associated burdens within the family. Thus initiatives focused on fathers appear to hold value for men, but potentially also for the wider family in terms of challenging or ‘undoing’ some traditional gendered practices around parenting. Exploring women’s perspectives of such initiatives will then add a greater understanding of the benefits for fathers but also how positive effects may ripple out within the family (and potentially beyond).

## **Background**

This paper draws on data from an evaluation of a father’s project situated in an area of multiple deprivation. In 2013, a social enterprise, based in the North West of England, pitched a social innovation project to a local clinical commissioning group (CCGs are the bodies responsible for commissioning health services within the NHS). The project, (anonymised to protect the identity of the participants in this research and the wider community) aimed to investigate the links between fathers and children’s wellbeing with a view to improving these.. The proposed social innovation approach was based on the premise that the community itself could find and share its own wisdom to help build resilience and sustainability. It achieved this by assisting men in developing spaces to be with their children, and with other men who were fathers. Part of the remit of the initiative involved the development of specific father/children activities by the men themselves, such as a ‘dad and kid’s club’, as well as social opportunities for the men to come together without their children. From the outset men from within the community were specifically and directly involved in shaping and, over time, leading the project. The evaluation from which this data is drawn was funded by the social enterprise organisation.

Whilst the wider evaluation of this initiative captured the perspectives of key stakeholders, as well as men and their children, it was felt that understanding how women perceived the use,

value and impact of the initiative was another important aspect within a holistic evaluation. This was underpinned by the notion that fathers need to be understood in relation to mothers (Matta and Knudson-Martin, 2006). Engaging with women thus helped situate the project in relation to partners and families, and thereby offering a wider perspective and further opening up understandings and narratives around gendered roles and practices, and the possibility of the transformative effect of initiatives aimed at fathers.

Thus, whilst the women may not have been directly engaged within the initiative, given that 'how men engage in parenting is significant not only to the children but also to the men and their intimate relationships' (Matta and Knudson-Martin, 2006, p.23), gathering the views of women was deemed an important dimension in more fully understanding the reach of the project.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews with women from the local community in which the initiative was situated. The interview topics focused around possible changes the women may have noted as a result of the initiative and the significance of these changes within their family lives, as well as any areas for improvement they identified with the project. The project workers acted as gatekeepers in accessing participants. There was felt to be some nervousness and suspicion by the community about research, as found in other 'over-researched' communities (Clark, 2008), so the use of familiar persons as gatekeepers to help explain the research and facilitate recruitment was deemed important. All the interviews were conducted by a female researcher, the rationale being in line with the notion that,

...women are almost always enthusiastic about talking to a women researcher, even if they have some initial anxieties about the purpose of the research or their own 'performance' in the interview situation (Finch, 1993, p.167)

Similarly to the experience that Finch (1993) describes, the women appeared pleased to have been asked for, and have an outlet for, their views and an opportunity to talk about their family lives in relation to the men's wellbeing project. This notion that 'a closer relationship is built up when women interview women' (Lewis, 2003, p. 65) appeared applicable then within this research experience. Thus, despite some apprehension from the gatekeepers about how the women would respond, the process of engaging these women was viewed by the project team as highly positive, and interviewees themselves spoke to the interviewer about enjoying the process of participating and having the opportunity to share their perspectives. There was a sense of easy sharing among the interviewees, even by women deemed 'shy' or 'nervous' by the gatekeepers. Early communication between the researcher and the women about possible participation and arrangements for being interviewed was primarily conducted via text message which was confirmed as the women's preferred mode of communication by the gatekeepers, thus some rapport building was often done prior to the face to face interview meeting.

The interviews were conducted in a children's centre within the community in which the women resided, which was identified by the gatekeepers as a space with which the women were familiar and felt comfortable attending. The value in having the female researcher involved was also illuminated through the space in which the interviews occurred. The venue was primarily a female occupied space (in terms of both staff and the community who were using the space, which was seen as an issue for the men in the wider study), and if more formal rooms were unavailable, interviews took place in unused nursery spaces, or the breastfeeding rooms. Thus mutual meanings were created between researcher and participants around being women and of occupying feminised spaces comfortably together (Finley, 2003). This was

important in the development of rapport and in creating the subsequent ease within the interviews.

The interviews averaged 30 minutes and were focused on key questions around what the women knew of the project, any changes in people (e.g. their partners or children) as a result of the project, what benefits they felt may come from a project like this, and whether the project would be applicable to other areas. In answering these questions the women often talked about broader issues that related to their lives and experiences and much of this, as the themes demonstrate, was underpinned by gendered understandings of social life.

At the outset, gatekeepers anecdotally identified that there were a number of different typologies of women in relation to the project including; ‘fans of the project’, current partners of project members, former partners of project members and ‘critics of the project’ (though overlap between these categories was also evident, and then perceived critics were actually less critical than the gatekeepers had purported). Whilst the sample was a convenience sample, this typology did offer a crude sampling frame in terms of trying to gain a balance and diversity of views (where possible). The use of this approach to sampling reflected the wider evaluative backdrop of this work, but also allowed for a variety of perspectives rather than perhaps just those who are ‘fans’ of initiatives such this one.

In total, seven interviews were conducted. Whilst this may seem a small number a systematic study of the time that data saturation occurs in qualitative research suggests that the majority of final codes and elements for meta-themes are present by the sixth interview (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). The sample was a mix of the perceived groupings identified by the gatekeepers, and all the women who were interviewed were mothers. Five of the women had a direct link to the project through their partners or former partners, one through a sibling relationship, and the final participant had volunteered within the initiative and lived locally.

The women could all be described as working class, six of the women were white and one participant was Afro-Caribbean. The interviewees ranged in age from mid-20- 40's. All of the women had at least one child, and some of the interviewees had a multiple children, sometimes from different partnering's, the children ranged in age from 6 months to teenagers.

The interview data was analysed thematically, initially looking for both semantic (descriptive) and latent (underpinning) elements and developing emergent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial coding, categorising and theme development was done by [initials to be placed here in final version] who conducted the interviews. The wider research team then completed a process of iterative reading of interview transcripts in order to confirm and adjust categories and themes where necessary. The process of confirmation and adjustment of themes occurred verbally within the context of project meetings between the research team. Key themes developed are: 'the benefits of dads groups to mums'; 'spaces for fathers, space to help change roles'; and 'setting a healthier example of manhood'. The three major themes which emerged from this data are each discussed in the analysis below. Pseudonyms were utilised to ensure anonymity of the participants and full ethical approval was gained from University Ethics prior to the commencement of the research.

## **Analysis**

### **Benefits of dads groups to mums**

Many of the women interviewed readily identified the importance of the initiative in terms of the time and space it created for them which would not otherwise have been available (particularly with the activities the dads generated that involved their children). The opportunity to regain some 'me' rather than 'mum' time was seen as a significant for the women: 'I think it gives the mums a break as well to be honest cos you don't really get a break really as such cos you are always like 'mum'' (Marie)



There appears to be a normative assumption in the above quote that mothers are always ‘on call’ within the family unit, or are the identified ‘go to’ person for children. This was echoed by other women interviewed, reflecting previous research suggesting there is a ‘presumption that wives are essentially responsible for household production’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.143). Being able to experience a break in this pattern was therefore viewed positively by the women.

The engagement in ‘me time’ for the mothers also extended beyond just the time the fathers spent at the group with their children; it also included the time when the men attended ‘child-free’ activities at the project with the other men:

He goes, oh I’ll go play some pool with group whoever, so he goes to that as well so I get [some] afternoon peace as well. Got my feet up, I can catch up with programmes, so I get time to myself again but he gets time to be [himself] with other dads. And they... you know, they can have a bit of time where they are just themselves, being a dad is not easy (Natasha)

The time that women ‘gained’ due to the men attending the project then appeared to hold dual value; the men (and children) were gaining a positive experience by attending, and the women were able to see some ‘space’ in their family opening up for themselves. As suggested above, women are more likely to be the burden-carriers of family responsibility, ‘That there is a considerable gender discrepancy in this type of responsibility suggests that mothers are more time constrained by their child care duties than are fathers’ (Craig, 2006, p. 275). Women also suggest that they feel acutely the loss of personal time when they become mothers (McVeigh, 1997), thus opportunities to have time to themselves was understandably relished.

The women also noted that it was nice when the fathers and children went to joint activities as it gave the whole family something different to discuss when they returned. In this sense the

project was opening up new dialogues and channels of communication within families, which many women valued. This was something they may not have experienced without the initiative:

...so it kind of gives you something different to talk about with the kids coz normally mums are just like after you've done doing your homework, it's not normal...well it is normal for people, it just gets a bit mundane and boring (Natasha)

Whilst 'mundane' conversations are important for families, such as in terms of decision making processes (Fiese, 2006), new conversational avenues appeared to be a welcome addition to current repertoires of family talk for the women in this study.

Many of the women specifically talked of the enjoyment their children expressed on returning from activities, "they come home, 'mum look what I made'" (Rachel), which created opportunities to share as a family.

I think it's about what happens when they come home and its happy to see that they are all like 'oh we did this today, we did that today' and I think to separate yourself from what is it that they are doing (Gill)

Gill's reflection that the project allowed 'separation' from what her children were doing reflects the 'novelty' that many of these women found in the initiative giving the men and children time together, and may dovetail with Craig's (2006, p. 275) notion that 'fathers in intact families are relatively rarely alone with their children'.

These new conversational opportunities also extended to the 'men only' aspects of the project '...it's good, because he is mixing with these people and he is having time away from home, [when] he comes back he has got something to talk about' (Gill). These communication benefits demonstrate the idea that Burgess (2009) suggests about programmes or initiatives for fathers having positive benefits on the relationship between parents. In this context such

relationship benefits also extended to women who were no longer in an intimate relationship with their children's father. For example, Rachel attributes the improved communication between her and her children's father to the impact that the dads group has had on him:

We talk a lot more now... Yeah a lot more, we talk more, in a way we are doing it for the kids, but before he'd come in and be like 'Hi', but now it's like, 'did you like it today' and we are communicating more. So [that] is one good thing as well... The kids [would] go all the time, 'why are you not talking to my mum', 'why are you not talking to my dad?' Well, we are friends so, that's the way to be... considering we couldn't stand each other then, now, let's all be friends. So good. (Rachel)

The project then appears to have been able to offer the women positives within their own lives, beyond the impact they identified for the men themselves. Given that women still shoulder most child care within both intact and separated families (Yeung et al., 2001) it is perhaps unsurprising that new opportunities for women to have space 'to themselves' is viewed positively. For the men to substitute for the women's time in terms of caring (Craig, 2006) (even if such time and space is minimal in terms of the overall balance of care), demonstrated something new for the women interviewed here. Men demonstrating willingness and ability, as Backett (1987) discusses, could perhaps be viewed as indicators to the women of men becoming more 'involved' fathers (Ranson, 2008), even if the time offered to was still relatively little.

### **Space for fathers, space to help change roles**

The women interviewed identified how a group initiative for dads offered a unique opportunity for those men and their children. In some countries, particularly Scandinavia, the involvement of men and women in all aspects of childcare is becoming more equal (Westering, 2015). Whilst UK time-use studies have shown that the amount of time men spend involved in child

care has increased (O'Brien, 2005), there is still a distance to travel in terms of gender equalised childcare within the UK and particularly among communities in which traditional values remain embedded.

Fathers groups offer time and space for men to engage with their children, without the involvement of the children's mothers. The type of father-child engagement at the initiative examined for this research, which often focused around activities, reflects other research showing that contemporary fathers are now becoming more involved particularly in terms of 'fun' activities, i.e. leisure or play based activities (Dermott and Miller, 2015). Whilst such time may not be extensive in terms of duration, and the involvement in 'fun' activities may be narrated as part of the more enjoyable or easier aspects of parenting and child care, the women interviewed identified the importance of this space for men to be with the children.

The women perceived that taking their children to the group was seen as a means by which men could take parental responsibility and demonstrate parenting ability to themselves and to the women:

'You know it's also a place for kids to go and I think it's brilliant that dads get to be more involved without the responsibility of the mums' (Clare)

...to have dads being you know the sole carer even for an hour a couple of hours or whatever, it allows them to prove [themselves] to their partner (Deb)

The group then provided a 'safe space' for men to be with their children, and the presence of a female support worker was seen to be a welcome addition in this environment; 'I think you like the idea there's a women there if something does go wrong' (Deb). The need for the 'reassurance' of a female figure perhaps provides insight to the women's views on gender roles and parenting practices within this community, and supports the notion that fathers may spend

less time alone with children than mothers do (Craig, 2006) which can then create a sense of unease for some women about the standard of care men can provide for children. Whilst some suggest fatherhood can be viewed as being redefined within modern society - away from the father as 'breadwinner and disciplinarian' and towards involvement in more active childcare practices (Matta and Martin-Knudson, 2006; Shows and Gerstel, 2009) - the mothers interviewed here appeared to conform to at least some normative gender ideals in relation to child care. The opportunity for men to 'prove themselves' and take 'responsibility' for their children links to ideas that 'For many women, however, there was a sense in which they did not 'trust' their partners to do a good enough job of parenting- and their partners often agreed with this assessment' (Clarke and Popay, 1998, p.225).

This idea that men do not always do 'good enough' in the eyes of women can be further seen through the women discussing the level of organisation the men take in relation to the project; 'They could be more organised but that's a male thing, I think because it's run by mainly men. They are not that greatly organised' (Gill). Some of the women reflected and verbalised that traditional roles in relation to child care were often, in part, perpetuated by women themselves; the idea that 'mums know best' may at times hamper men's ability to be more involved with their children.

Women are inclined to control, men obviously are controlling I think - or can be, some of them can be. Women are time controlling as in if someone is not doing something correct, they will just jump in and they'll do it for them because it's easier. It's easier isn't it? (Gill)

The women were then perhaps caught in a dichotomy; they saw it as positive that the men spend more time with their children and take more responsibility, but they also had a nervousness about this and wanted to keep control of the domain that is socially constructed as

‘theirs’, perhaps demonstrating ‘emphasised femininity’ (Mróz et al., 2011). There could therefore have been some tension around that aspect, but the women were quite reflexive about the situation, and appeared to have weighed up the benefits, were reassured by safety strategies, (i.e. a female worker being present), and thus felt that having the opportunity for such responsibility would, on balance, be a fruitful element for the fathers.

The opportunity for men to be more involved with their children was seen to have impacted beyond the group time men may spend with their children, with some women noticing a broader redefining of the role of ‘dad’ for some families:

...I think it’s good for children as well as the dads and so that way the kids know that they’ve got a dad to go with... its two parents not just the one which is the mum cos most things go to the mum then the dad, apart from the fun things that dads do but there is more to it for a dads job than that (Clare)

This impact included children knowing that men do ‘caring’ as well as ‘providing’ within family life which was viewed as creating healthier practices:

I think a lot of families suffer like that cos its mum does the cleaning, and mum will do everything that the kids need and dad is just going to work. And if they know that dad is involved as well they can do things with the dad they can speak to him if there is a problem, even if there’s not a problem. I think it gives them a much healthier relationship. (Natasha)

Whilst the gains in father-child relationships was seen as positive, some of the women did identify that advances for men may entail shifts away from them. Mothers’ not being the de facto decision maker or confidante to their children was then seen as perhaps being less easy to accept for some women:

If there is a problem he will turn to [his dad], I don't even get mithered<sup>1</sup> anymore that's' a bad thing sometimes. You think they don't care about me anymore, they don't want to talk to me, they want to talk to their dad all the time. But its good because they've got a good relationship with their dad...cos before we would just like [be] at school when the older two were still at primary school if he picked them up they'd been a problem, 'is mum not with you', 'we need to speak to mum' and ...he felt like he didn't matter (Natasha)

This chimes with other work around working-class families, which suggests that women themselves were often unwilling to seek equality about parenting, and 'wanting' to remain the significant caring figure - which some have described as indicative of the strength of gendered expectations in relation to family life (Legerski and Cornwall, 2010).

However, the value of the men being more involved with the children was further reinforced by the enjoyment the children had in spending more time with their fathers; through their children's pleasure the women are finding positive ways to share in the initiative as well. The mothers were keen to hear from their children how they felt about attending the project, 'I always get feedback from my daughter, she says yeah it's really good' (Laura), and the women interviewed all spoke of the positivity their children had about attending, 'my kids love it' (Clare). This supports previous research which suggests men being more involved in care has positive implications for the bond between fathers and their children (Craig, 2006).

The initiative then offered space for the positive aspects of fatherhood to be framed within different parameters. It helped facilitate some opportunities to reframe gender roles around parenting and caring, such as children being socialised to see men as a valid source of comfort

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<sup>1</sup> Mithered is a Northern English dialect word. With 'mither' meaning to 'make a fuss or moan' (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/mither>) the concept of being 'mithered' is equivalent to being pestered.

or support within the families, beyond the traditional notion that emotional labour is feminised within family life.

### **Setting a healthier example of manhood**

The women identified how the initiative offered settings that were healthier to the men involved, particularly in terms of social practices and coping mechanisms. The initiative was perceived as creating an opportunity for men to engage with other men in ways divergent from perceived hegemonic norms for men, which includes practices such as violence/aggression, risk taking, competitiveness and emotional restraint (Connell, 1995). Women suggested the initiative was marked in its difference from other settings in which men in the community may come together collectively; ‘Oh my god it’s amazing...it was just very quiet low conversation because there are personal matters they are discussing as opposed to blokes in a pub... There is no bravado with them’ (Deb). The pub was seen as the traditional venue in which men often socialised within the community, which chimes with research that suggests the pub can be a site of reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Jayne, Valentine and Holloway, 2012). In contrast, a number of the women made reference to the positivity of the initiative in not involving the pub and associated drinking practices:

That’s the problem around here, its kids are just left to their own devices...And it’s like Friday comes and you can’t just wait to get in a pub and I know that’s what people do but...I don’t think it’s right (Marie).

The project setting and the non-traditional peer support of other men was then viewed as healthier for the men. In turn, this was viewed by the women as being healthier for their families:



I think men understand men easier and they go ‘yeah I know what you mean’. Whereas if there’s nobody to talk to what else can they do? But you know, it will like build up until they cause a fight or they go drinking and try drowning their sorrows - doesn’t make it any better, it kinda hides it from yourself for a bit - so it is a good way of keeping healthy relationships with your family and keep your families together so it is good that they’ve got somewhere to go, something to do (Natasha)

The ability of the men to develop means for coping with the stresses and problems of life, including the challenges of family life, was also seen as part of setting a good example to their children. Positive exposure to fathers demonstrating that being a man includes talking about problems and showing care was an important element within the initiative:

It has helped them out really cos he is now showing the kids how to be a man really. How to grow up knowing... and they know that if there is a problem they can speak to him, they know they don’t have to go out to the pub or sit around the house watching telly all day (Natasha)

The way in which women across the interviews discussed traditional coping and social practices of the men in their community constituted a stereotypical view of ‘being a man’, and, in doing so, the women appeared to be describing traits associated with a hegemonic masculinity. Given that the area in which the initiative was situated was working class, this was perhaps not surprising that a ‘traditional’ view of masculinity was being described, as ‘class locations are major contributors to the construction of masculinities because of their role in shaping location’ (Shows and Gerstel, 2009, p.179). This was further supported by the perceptions of men, including fathers, that some of the women discussed. The notion of fathers as being ‘useless’ for example was presented by some of the women, which also links to how they are often portrayed within popular media (Brown, 2013).

I think it gives the men more independence as well cos we grow up thinking men are useless you know, because like we used to think they just, all they are about is sitting watching football but now it's totally different I think...a few of them, a couple of dads have a bad reputation they've all of them have a bad reputation in a lot of women's eyes but now you see a lot of this dads but you just take a look at all this dads and they are more approachable and they are not like all those dads we used to hear about (Clare)

The idea that, within certain communities, social activities for many men are formulated around alcohol, sport, and frequently involve being away from the home. That men engage in such social practices can lead to them being viewed as less preoccupied with their children and families, perhaps linking with the idea that 'motherhood is mandated and fatherhood discretionary: that men 'opt in' and women have to 'opt out'' (Clarke and Popay, 1998, p. 226). In this sense men are viewed as being able to exercise greater choice over spending time with their children than women perhaps can (Craig, 2006). Whilst narratives such as Clare's show that 'women themselves are often aware of the ambivalence of their relations with men' (Oakley and Rigby, 1998, p. 124), the women interviewed here showed how an initiative for men in the community could begin to change (sometimes long held) perceptions of men:

Yeah its changed my thoughts on men, which was key for me...a lot of women can probably get this, you know if you see a group of men who support each other, who are mature and responsible, and if that hasn't been part of your life growing up, when you meet a man who seems to have those qualities you assume it's like a 'one off' thing....You don't get much opportunity to meet a group of men and see them in that way...how else do you see them? You go into a pub, you see a group of men, they are a complete opposite of this...Because we women generally raise the children and our preconceived idea of men is what we then hand down to our children (Deb)

The initiative, by taking men out of the home and into healthier settings that facilitate positive practices, could then be seen as a means of bringing men more into family life, and in turn demonstrating a different picture of the men within the wider community. This is manifest in the women's narratives through discussions of changes in roles, dynamics and communication within families, but also via the exploration of wider shifts in women's perceptions about 'good men' and 'good dads'. Despite claims that 'involved' fatherhood has now become more normative (Dermott and Miller, 2015), there does appear to be, in the context of the community in which this project was embedded, a persistence of some 'mythical story telling' about men similar to have which Ferguson and Hogan (2004) describe:

A powerful exclusionary dynamic surrounds the stories that float around the system about a man, usually about his dangerousness, but also fecklessness, and the various attitudinal 'uns' - uncaring, unreliable, unable, unwilling (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p. 45)

Some women interviewed described their existing of previous negative perceptions of men as chiming with Ferguson and Hogan's (2004) notion of mythologizing men in terms of their contribution, or lack thereof, to family life. An initiative such as this was seen, in a small-scale but significantly important way, to be addressing – changing and/or challenging - some of these negative stereotypes within the eyes of this community.

## **Conclusion**

Women were interviewed about their experiences of an initiative for men and whilst the overall evaluation (of which this data was part) focused on the value of the initiative in terms of improving the men and children's wellbeing, wider implications around the initiative in terms of gendered roles and practices within those families also emerged. This paper makes a new contribution to literature on initiatives for fathers and demonstrates the value of incorporating

views of others impacted by an initiative, in this instance women, even when they are not the intended primary recipients.

The interviews demonstrated a number of ways in which women identified the value of the initiative, including the direct benefits to mums, helping change roles in the family, and helping men set a healthier example within the family unit. The exploration of these themes demonstrates underpinning gendered notions around fatherhood, caring practices and women's perceptions of men.

The main benefit for women was of giving them 'time for themselves'. Previous work suggests that 'mothers are more time constrained by their child care duties than are fathers' (Craig, 2006, p. 275), and the women's accounts here of gaining some 'precious' child-free time supports this notion. Whilst the time 'gained' by the women was often not extensive, perhaps totalling a few hours a week, the women were keen to stress the value of reclaiming something for 'themselves' as women and individuals, rather than as 'just' mothers. They also saw the importance of this time in relation to their children being with their fathers. However, a certain level of 'maternal gatekeeping' (Allen and Hawkins, 1999; McBride et al., 2005; Puhlman and Pasley, 2013) could be seen in relation to the attitude women had about men's competencies in caring for children or around men now taking a more equitable role. Thus, the women's roles being diminished, women themselves appeared to remain central players in the continuation and perpetuation of gendered practices within families partly through such 'gatekeeping'.

The attendance at an initiative offering activities for fathers and children created new conversations within families, providing a 'child-centred hook' around which families could share. This was seen by the women to be a useful means for facilitating improved communication with their partners and children's father. However, the creation of time for men with their children in 'fun' settings does also chime with the idea that men's time with their

children is often centred around play and fun activities (Craig, 2006; Dermott and Miller, 2015) which could perhaps perpetuate gendered norms around the types of 'labour' that mothers and fathers do. This could be a useful area for further exploration.

As a result of attending activities within this initiative, men were viewed by the women as being able to take greater responsibility for their children and to demonstrate to their children that their role as 'dad' encompasses caring aspects more often provided by the mothers. The women were therefore suggesting that some of the men were now doing more of what Shows and Gerstel (2009) call 'private fathering'. This was seen as important by the women, and may begin to offer positive shifts in the perceived gender differences around child care responsibilities (Scourfield, 2003; Craig, 2006). For men in this community, beginning to do some of the emotional labour of parenting, in terms listening and talking with their children if there were issues, was seen as an important and significant step forward from the perspective of the women. This may represent a 'degree of relational shift between parents, thereby some reordering of gender relations, potentially amounting to the 'undoing' of some gendered norms' (Dermott and Miller, 2015, pp. 184-185). As others have suggested, working class men may actually be more likely to undo gendered parenting practices compared to middle class men, and the women interviewed here demonstrate that this may indeed be occurring within this community (Shows and Gerstel, 2009). How extensive such relational shifts may be beyond the sample interviewed here, and how far any 'undoing' of gender is occurring for other families within this community who were involved within the initiative, requires further attention.

The benefits of a woman interviewing women about a fathers initiative is perhaps evident through the discussions of women's abilities around the 'trust' that the women did (or more often did not) have at the outset of the initiative in terms of men taking responsibility for their children, and how a fathers project can and was assisting with undoing any mistrust. The open

and reflective commentaries of the women, allowed access into the ‘other side’ of the fatherhood experience in this regard and, in doing so, opened up understandings of gender norms and relationships within that community. This included changes in hegemonic practices around socialisation which were often seen as the norm, and changes in women’s perceptions of men, who had often previously been mythologized as ‘problematic’. As men were seen to change, and present new examples of fatherhood, the women felt there was also an ‘undoing’ of their own perceptions and generational beliefs. The experiences and perceptions the women outlined can best be situated as products of their context, ‘...parenting cannot transcend socio-economic reality...As such, parenting decisions, practices and aspirations can only be understood in their situated context’ (Gillies, 2008, p. 111). The community, one best described as experiencing multiple disadvantage, gave rise to the need for an initiative to help improve the lives of local fathers and their families, and the changes the women identified are relative to those circumstances and contexts.

The inclusion of women’s perspectives is a novel, and we would argue interesting, approach in understanding an initiative for fathers. As demonstrated here, it offers value in terms of understanding how single sex parenting interventions can be perceived by those not directly included but indirectly impacted, and of the wider gendered understandings of family life in which such projects may well be situated and contextualised. Thus, whilst some of the ‘shifts’ women within this community identified around parenting roles and responsibilities, may externally seem somewhat marginal gains, those experiences were verbalised as deeply significant for these particular women, principally when they ran counter to generational gendered experiences of family life, and the role of men as fathers within families that the women had themselves experienced. Whilst perceptions may be that women could feel ‘excluded’ by an initiative specifically for men, in this instance the women had indeed bought

in to, and recognised the value of, the project for the men, themselves and their children and how this could be beneficial for them all in terms of their family lives.

There remains scope for further work in how women experience such initiatives, and using couple based interviews (Bjørnholt and Farstad, 2012) could further develop relational understandings of single sex projects. Considering the norms and values around family life, building on work such as Conlon et al., (2014) around the gendered divisions within communities which can be described as areas of multiple deprivation, would also further our understandings of whether the gendered landscape the women describe here is in anyway typified across demographics and class locations.

This work has practice implications relating to how initiatives which are designed for a specific group can have wider structural and social impacts, and also how best these can be utilised. Thus, for new projects aimed at fathers, considering relational aspects about how the project can support the shifting of gendered beliefs and practices among families and further promote equality among parents would be a useful dimension, and one which may help embed further social impact beyond the primary objectives of the initiative.

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